

UNDER DEVELOPMENT

What's up, Doc?

David Robinson receives an obsolete backup disk from one of his beloved clients, but fortunately his museum of dusty, cartoon-inspired servers saves the day

This morning I received a small packet in the post from Creepy Ted, the accountant of a building firm we did a system for in 1991. So what was inside? Eye of newt? Hemlock? Dried dragon dung? In fact, the contents were even more arcane than that: a UNIX-format 100MB Zip disk, the spawn of an 'eBay special' SCSI Zip drive that Storeman Sid had finally roused himself to fit to Bob the Builder's UNIX box.

Ted had sent me a disk to see if we could read his data from it. You'd think this would be a simple matter, but no. The Omega UNIX drivers use a format that's completely alien to anything with the name Microsoft attached, so it's no use just bunging it into a Windows computer with a Zip drive and expecting it to read it. That's assuming you even have a Windows computer with a Zip drive, as we do.

I can remember when these things were the seventh wonder of the computing world – something the size of a floppy disk that held 100MB or, if you had a posh one, 250MB. They were a refinement of an earlier removable disk system from Iomega called a Bernoulli Box, which used removable media that could hold up to – wait for it – 10MB. The Bernoulli bit refers to the aerodynamic effect that keeps the read/write head floating above the disk surface without actually touching it, which would cause wear and data loss. Of course, these things hail from a time well before digital cameras, when 10MB was a lot of text data and perfectly suitable for backups. See the Museum section at www.drsaxon.co.uk for pictures and information.

RARE NECESSITIES

In theory, we should still have had a UNIX computer that we could use to check the disk for readability. "Where's Boo Boo?" I asked Garry. He didn't know and neither did anyone else. Boo Boo is/was/should be the one remaining UNIX box we possess. In the past the person who built the server got to choose the name – the only rule being that it had to be a cartoon character. Very early in our history there was



Mickey, followed by Minnie, Fred, Wilma, Barney (a Windows 2000 server that still exists), Yogi (sadly dead) and Boo Boo. More recent servers have been called Homer, Bart, Bender (a virtual server running multiple operating systems for testing) and Moe, which is equipped with multiple quad Xeon processors. I built Boo Boo almost 20 years ago, but where the hell is he now?

SEND 'EM PACKING

After an exhaustive search, Boo Boo turned up under a large pile of cardboard boxes in what's euphemistically referred to as the 'store room' (it is actually a 'tip'). The problem is that everything we buy is delivered in a cardboard box and, if you're building a fancy server, there can be lots of boxes, all with packing foam inserts and other stuff that gets left behind when the computer goes to the customer.

The accumulation of boxes and packaging detritus has been a problem for years. Before we moved into our current office I used to solve it periodically by having a bonfire, but I had to stop after one fateful Christmas Eve, when the wind got up and the fire spread to the field next door, which was full of dry grass. It was very embarrassing being introduced to neighbours at a drinks party as 'the pyromaniac'. Mrs R banned me from bonfires after that.

These days we try to be green and take cardboard to the council recycling unit. But even that's

fraught with danger, as the jobsworths that run it want stuff from domestic sources only, and gleefully harass people who try to sneak in anything from commercial organisations. I'd have thought they'd be grateful for any recyclable material, but what do I know?

STUCK ON UNIX

Finding Boo Boo wasn't the end of the problem. As if to prove that Bob the Builder was pushing his luck too far, Boo Boo would get only so far through the bootup process before reporting a thousand and one hard disk errors. I used to know every UNIX command by heart, but the memory grows dim and we chucked the manuals years ago. Thank goodness for the web. A Google search revealed www.tek-tips.com, which in turn reminded me that the command I wanted was fsk (shorthand for file system check). Sadly, it didn't fix the errors and Boo Boo still wouldn't boot.

Garry has a collection of old hard disks that we use for 'fire drills' – exercises we run regularly for customers with support contracts to ensure that we can actually recover data and critical files from their backups. Miraculously, even though Bob hadn't paid maintenance fees for six years, we still had a fire drill disk for him – and it booted up in Boo Boo. Sadly, it didn't have drivers for Iomega Zip drives or network connections. One step forward and two back!

We decided to try eBay, as you can find all sorts of obscure

computer kit there. A quick search revealed a Sinclair ZX81, Spectrum, Dragon 32 and a Commodore Pet complete with twin 5¼in floppy drives, as seen on the recent BBC programme, *Ashes to Ashes*. You could buy one of each and still have change from £50. So what about a second-hand SCO machine? "0 items found for: SCO UNIX Computer" said the search screen. Worth a try, I suppose – as was our post to eBay's Want It Now section, which hasn't yet yielded a response.

BAUD STIFF

At this point we were getting a bit desperate. One possible solution was to rig up an FTP server and get the data files from Bob's machine using a serial cable. At 38,400 baud (or around 4,000 characters per second) it would take a couple of hours to move the files. That's assuming the serial line didn't fall over, which, if memory serves, is a very big assumption. I've spent many a happy hour breaking data into small chunks, attempting to guarantee a successful transmission by that method.

Fortunately, Patrick eventually found a workable, if short-term, solution. It seems that the Santa Cruz Operation (SCO) is still alive and kicking and offers a trial download of Open Server 6 from its website. This has support for USB Iomega Zip drives and regular Ethernet network connections to Windows networks. It's a 30-day trial but is otherwise fully functional. We downloaded the files, made a bootable install CD and within an hour we had a working UNIX server connected to our network and could move Creepy Ted's files anywhere we liked using drag and drop.

There was only one remaining question: what should we call this new server? My three-year-old granddaughter and her favourite programme provided the perfect answer: Iggly Piggle. **CS**

David Robinson

Software and systems developer

davidr@computershopper.co.uk

